

The impact of dialectal variation on documentation and conservation work:
The view from Amdo Tibetan
Zoe Tribur
University of Oregon

Summary

For researchers interested in exploring questions of typology and linguistic universals, documentation of dialects provides priceless data, but such problems as what features constitute a dialect and who speaks it complicate the task of identifying and collecting data, especially for dialects that are low prestige or are only spoken by diglossic speakers. The field researcher must be alert to the possible existence of such forms and be aware of the issues associated with them.

For the conservationist, the linguist's instinct is to argue that dialects should be preserved as part of the community's heritage, as well as having value in their own right, but individuals struggling to reverse language shift may feel that the reduction of diversity is a necessary step toward ensuring the survival of the language for future generations. However, the selection of a "standard" form can be problematic, sometimes resulting in conflict within the community or, more seriously, causing some speakers to be excluded from conservation efforts altogether. It behooves the field linguist to be aware of community attitudes toward diversity and to try to understand how diversity impacts language use within the community.

Two varieties of Amdo Tibetan: Gro.Tshang and mGo.Log

Spoken by an estimated 1.5 million people, Amdo Tibetan does not fit the profile of a typical endangered language. However, AT's status as a minority language and the increasing use of both spoken and written Chinese have already resulted in language shift in some areas, such as the Gro.Tshang area of eastern Qinghai Province. The author has observed that efforts to reverse language shift in the area by encouraging literacy in Written Tibetan have been unsuccessful in part because literacy teachers don't speak the Gro.Tshang dialect. At the same time, negative attitudes toward the Gro.Tshang dialect discourage some speakers from using Tibetan with people from other regions, contributing to the mistaken belief throughout Amdo that Gro.Tshang Tibetans speak only Chinese. Part of the blame for this belief, however, also lies in the relatively high level of unintelligibility of Gro.Tshang Tibetan with other AT dialects, and many language activists and Gro.Tshang residents see dialect diversity as an obstacle to preserving Tibetan as the language of Gro.Tshang Tibetans.

South and west of Gro.Tshang, the variety of AT spoken in mGo.Log Prefecture exists under very different conditions. mGo.Log Prefecture is ethnically, religiously and economically homogenous and so linguistic variation within mGo.Log is usually overlooked by mGo.log Tibetans, which makes it likely to be overlooked by the linguist. At the same time, mGo.Log Tibetan is characterized by distinctive phonetic features that make it easily identifiable to Tibetans from other regions. The mGo.Log "accent" is slightly stigmatized in part because it is so distinct, however the homogenous make-up of the area as well as a strong sense of identity among mGo.Log Tibetans suggest that this variety has a more secure future than Gro.Tshang Tibetan.

Defining features of Gro.Tshang and mGo.Log:

Gro.Tshang:

- Apicalization
- Reduced onset inventory
- Possible tonogenesis
- Strong retention of original “Tibetan” lexemes
- More light verb and complex predicate structures
- Loss of ergative/nominative case distinction
- ??

mGo.Log:

- High retention of complex onsets
- Voicing contrast in fricatives
- Extremely centralized vowel space
- Strong retention of original “Tibetan” lexemes
- Greater distribution of bare-stem verb phrases
- ??

Comparative word list

Grotshang	Mgolog	English
mɿ*	mɿə	‘person’
tshu	tsho	Plural
tshɿ*	tʃhə	‘water, river’
tshu	mtsho	‘lake’
tʃhu	kho	Third person, singular
tʃhu	cho	Second person, singular
sa	za	‘to eat’

* ɿ and ɿ represent an apical unrounded and unrounded vowel, respectively.

Comparative syntax

Gro.Tshang

1a. *ŋa fi -ke*
1S ‘know’-IMP.EGO
‘I know (it).’

1b. *ŋa ma- sui*
1S NEG.PAST-‘eat’.PAST
‘I didn’t eat.’

mGo.Log

2a. *ŋə ʈi -kə*
1S.ERG ‘know’-IMP.TEST
‘I know (it).’

2b. *ŋə ma- za*
1S.ERG NEG.PAST-‘eat’
‘I didn’t eat.’

Appendix

The 25 languages of Tibetic (Tournadre 2008, 282-283):

Ü-Tshang (TAR); Kham-Hor (Sichuan, TAR, Yunnan); Amdo (Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu); Thewo-Chone (Gansu, Sichuan); Ladakhi (Jammu, Kashmir); Balti (NW Territories, Pakistan); Purki (Jammu, Kashmir); Spiti (Himalchal Pradesh); Dzongkha (Bhutan); Drenjong (Sikkim); Sherpa (Nepal, TAR); Kyirong-Kagate (Nepal, TAR); Jirel (Nepal); Tsamang (Bhutan); Lakha (Bhutan); Dur (Bhutan); Mera-Sakteng (Bhutan); Zhongu (Sichuan); Gserpa (Sichuan); Khalong (Sichuan); Dongwang (Yunnan); Dhromo (TAR); Zitsadegu (Sichuan); Baima (Sichuan); Drugchu (Gansu).

Bibliography

- Green, R. J., & Green, R. J. (2012). Amdo Tibetan Media Intelligibility. *SIL Electronic Survey Reports*, 19, 50.
- Hua Kan, ed. (2002). 藏语安多方言词汇. 兰州: 甘肃民族出版社.
- Labov, William. (1996). The organization of dialect diversity in North America. In *Fourth International Conference on Spoken Language Processing*.
- Sung, Kuo-ming and Lha.byams rGyal. 2005. Colloquial Amdo Tibetan: A complete course for adult English speakers. Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House.
- Tournadre, Nicolas. (2008). Arguments against the concept of ‘Conjunct/Disjunct’ in Tibetan. In *Chomolangma, Demawend und Kasbek. Festschrift für Roland Bieltmeier zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*. B. Huber, et al. (Eds), Vol. 1. p. 281-308.
- Wanma Lengzhi. (2007). 论藏语安多方言语音特征. 青海民族学院学报: 藏文版, (002), 16-26.
- Zhang, Jichuan. (1996). A sketch of Tibetan dialectology in China: Classifications of Tibetan dialects. *Cahiers de linguistique – Asie Orientale* 25:115-133.